

Message Text

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SUBJECT: MY TALKS IN SYRIA

FOR THE PRESIDENT FROM SECRETARY VANCE

1. I COME AWAY FROM MY VISIT TO DAMASCUS WITH TWO PRINCIPAL IMPRESSIONS.
2. THE FIRST IS THE EXTENT TO WHICH SYRIA, HISTORICALLY AMONG THE MOST MILITANT AND RIGID OF ARAB COUNTRIES, IS SOUNDING THE SAME THEMES ON THE BASIC ISSUES OF A PEACE SETTLEMENT AS ARE EGYPT, JORDAN AND SAUDI ARABIA. IN CONTRAST TO THE ACRIMONY THAT MARKED INTER-ARAB RELATIONS UNTIL RECENTLY, PRESIDENT ASAD AND THE LEADERS OF THE OTHER ARAB STATES I VISITED HAVE SUPRESSED THEIR RIVALRIES AND DIFFERENCES TO BEGIN TO FORGE A COMMON DIPLOMATIC STRATEGY FOR PEACE NEGOTIATIONS IN 1977. THEIR DIFFERENCES ARE BY NO MEANS FINALLY RESOLVED, AND THEY COULD REEMERGE IN RESPONSE TO INTERNAL PRESSURES. AT THE MOMENT, HOWEVER, THERE SEEMS TO BE A FIRM DETERMINATION TO WORK IN CONCERT TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES INCLUDING THE THORNY PLO ISSUE, TO GETTING NEGOTIATIONS STARTED THIS YEAR.
3. SECONDLY, MY TALKS IN DAMASCUS STRONGLY REINFORCE MY
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IMPRESSION OF HOW FAR APART THE ARAB GOVERNMENTS ON THE ONE HAND, AND ISRAEL ON THE OTHER, ARE IN THEIR CONCEPTS OF A FINAL SETTLEMENT. THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP TOOK NO POSITIONS THAT WERE FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT FROM THOSE I HEARD ON MY OTHER ARAB STOPS AND SHOWS SOME FLEXIBILITY ON PROCEDURAL QUESTIONS, BUT IT STATED POSITIONS ON ALL OF THE KEY SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES IN MORE UNCOMPROMISING TERMS THAN DID THE EGYPTIANS, JORDANIANS AND SAUDIS.

4. I MET FIRST FOR OVER TWO HOURS WITH FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM,

AND THE BULK OF OUR MEETING WAS DEVOTED TO THE PROCEDURAL AND SUBSTANTIVE QUESTIONS RELATED TO A PEACE SETTLEMENT WHICH I ALSO COVERED IN MY TALKS IN ALL THE OTHER CAPITALS. WITH KHADDAM AND LATER WITH ASAI I REVIEWED THE PURPOSES OF MY TRIP AND YOUR DETERMINATION TO SPARE NO EFFORT TO HELP THE ARABS AND ISRAELIS MOVE TOWARD PEACE. KHADDAM OPENED WITH A LONG PRESENTATION WHICH REVIEWED THE ORIGINS OF THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT FROM THE ARAB PERSPECTIVE BEGINNING WITH THE "BETRAYAL" OF THE ARABS BY THE BRITISH AND THE FRENCH AFTER WORLD WAR I, THE INJUSTICE OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISRAEL ON PALESTINIAN-ARAB LAND, THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE AREA AND THE THREAT TO THE WORLD ECONOMY WHICH WOULD RESULT FROM THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOVIET HEGEMONY IN THE REGION. SAYING THAT THE PAST WAS NOW HISTORY, HOWEVER, KHADDAM SAID THE IMPORTANT THING IS WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE SITUATION WE NOW FACE. THE ARABS ARE NOW UNITED AND ARE FOR THE FIRST TIME PREPARED TO MAKE PEACE WITH ISRAEL-- A PEACE THAT WOULD BE JUST, PERMANENT AND STABLE. REJECTING ISRAEL'S CONCEPT OF "DEFENSIBLE" BORDERS AS IRRELEVANT IN AN AGE OF MODERN WEAPONS, KHADDAM SAID THAT THE PEACE MUST BE BASED UPON THE FULL RECOVERY OF ARAB TERRITORIES OCCUPIED IN 1967 AND ON RECOGNIZING THE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIAN ARAB PEOPLE WHICH WERE USURPED BY THE PARTITION OF PALESTINE IN 1947. KHADDAM STRONGLY URGED THE IMPORTANCE OF PLO PARTICIPATION ONE WAY OR ANOTHER AT GENEVA, ARGUING THAT ANY ATTEMPT TO ISOLATE THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM FROM THE QUESTIONS OF WITHDRAWAL AND PEACE WOULD LEAVE A MAJOR ELEMENT OF INSTABILITY IN THE SITUATION.

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HE DISMISSED THE ARGUMENT THAT THE PLO MUST FIRST RECOGNIZE ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST, SAYING THIS WOULD MEAN ABANDONMENT OF THEIR "USURPED" RIGHTS, AND IT IS UP TO ISRAEL FIRST TO RECOGNIZE THE PALESTINIANS AS AN ENTITY. IN ANY EVENT, HE SAID, IF THE PLO AND ISRAEL SIT AT THE SAME TABLE, THIS WOULD BECOME A NEW FACT.

5. KHADDAM RETURNED REPEATEDLY TO THE POINT THAT THERE HAD BEEN A MAJOR CHANGE IN THE ARAB POSITION TOWARD ISRAEL ARISING FROM ARAB RECOGNITION THAT THEY NEEDED PEACE IN ORDER TO DEVOTE THEIR RESOURCES TO SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPEMENT. REFLECTING THE DEEP SUSPICIONS OF ISRAELI INTENTIONS WHICH I FOUND IN ALL ARAB CAPITALS, KHADDAM SAID THE ARABS LOOKED TO THE US TO PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN BRINGING ISRAEL TO MODIFY ITS POSITION ON THE TERRITORIAL AND PALESTINIAN QUESTIONS. THERE HAD BEEN, HE SAID, A TREND TOWARD MODERATION ON THE ARAB SIDE SINCE 1967 BUT THIS WAS NOT RECIPROCATED ON THE ISRAELI SIDE.

6. IN RESPONSE TO MY PROBING AS TO WHETHER THESE SYRIAN POSITIONS WERE PRECONDITIONS FOR NEGOTIATIONS, KHADDAM SAID THEY WERE NOT; THEY WERE PRINCIPLES WHICH SYRIA WOULD INSIST ON IN THE NEGOTIATIONS BUT SYRIA WAS PREPARED TO SEE ALL POSITIONS DISCUSSED IN GENEVA. WHILE EXPRESSING NO OBJECTIONS TO TIMETABLE

I SUGGESTED WHICH LOOKS TOWARD RECONVENING THE GENEVA CONFERENCE IN THE SECOND HALF OF 1977, KHADDAM EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT WHETHER THE SITUATION WOULD BE FROZEN IN THE MEANTIME. I ASSURED HIM THIS WAS NOT OUR INTENTION AND THAT WE THOUGHT CONSIDERABLE GROUNDWORK COULD BE LAID IN THE INTERIM. IN DISCUSSING HOW THE GENEVA CONFERENCE MIGHT BE ORGANIZED, KHADDAM SAID SYRIA PREFERRED THAT THERE BE A SINGLE ARAB DELEGATION AND THAT SUB-COMMITTEES OF THE CONFERENCE BE ORGANIZED ALONG FUNCTIONAL RATHER THAN BILATERAL LINES -- E.G., THAT THERE MIGHT BE SUB-COMMITTEES TO DEAL WITH THE END OF THE STATE OF WAR, THE RIGHTS SECRET

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OF THE PALESTINIANS, TERRITORIAL QUESTIONS AND GUARANTEES.

7. IN A SUBSEQUENT TWO-HOUR MEETING WITH PRESIDENT ASAD, I WAS ABLE TO EXPLORE FURTHER THE PRINCIPAL POINTS COVERED IN MY CONVERSATION WITH KHADDAM. AT THE BEGINNING, I TOLD ASAD I HAD FOUND GENERAL AGREEMENT AT ALL OF MY STOPS THAT WE SHOULD SEEK TO RECONVENE GENEVA IN THE SECOND HALF OF 1977, THAT THE OBJECTIVE SHOULD BE TO DISCUSS AN OVERALL PEACE SETTLEMENT AND THAT, IF PROCEDURAL QUESTIONS COULD BE OVERCOME, THERE SHOULD BE NO PRECONDITIONS SO FAR AS THE DISCUSSION OF SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES WAS CONCERNED. I TOLD HIM THAT WE HAD, HOWEVER, FOUND MANY DIFFERENCES ON THE SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES THEMSELVES AND ON THE QUESTION OF PLO PARTICIPATION AT GENEVA.

8. OUTLINING HIS VIEWS OF A PEACE SETTLEMENT, ASAD SAID THERE MUST BE COMPLETE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL TO THE 1967 BORDERS ("IF THE STATE OF WAR CONTINUES 100 YEARS, WE WILL NOT GIVE UP ONE INCH OF TERRITORY OCCUPIED IN 1967"), THE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE MUST BE RECOGNIZED, AND THE STATE OF WAR MUST BE TERMINATED. IF THERE IS A TERMINATION OF THE STATE OF WAR, ASAD SAID, THERE WILL EXIST BY DEFINITION A STATE OF PEACE. ECHOING WHAT SADAT SAID TO ME EARLIER, ASAD SAID THAT RECOGNITION OF ISRAEL WAS NOT A PREREQUISITE FOR PEACE; 43:9&NITION WAS AN ATTRIBUTE OF SOVEREIGNTY; SYRIA DID NOT HAVE AT THE MOMENT IN MIND THE KIND OF DIPLOMATIC, ECONOMIC AND OTHER RELATIONS WHICH ISRAEL WAS INSISTING ON."A CONDITION OF PEACE IS ONE THING, RECOGNITION IS ANOTHER." WITH RESPECT TO THE FUTURE, HE SAID "IF WHAT WE HAVE ACHIEVED IS GOOD, IT WILL LEAD TO SOMETHING GOOD."

9. ASAD SAID SYRIA FAVORED GOING TO GENEVA BECAUSE IT SAW NO BETTER ALTERNATIVE BUT WAS NOT VERY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE RESULTS SECRET

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EVEN IF THERE IS A SOLUTION TO THE PROCEDURAL PROBLEMS, ASAD DID NOT SEE A POSSIBILITY OF AGREEMENT ON SUBSTANCE UNLESS THE U.S. BROUGHT ISRAEL TO CHANGE ITS POSITION ON WITHDRAWAL AND PALESTINIAN RIGHTS. IF THERE WERE AGREEMENT ON SUBSTANCE, THE FORM OF NEGOTIATIONS COULD BE WORKED OUT. IN SYRIA'S VIEW, ASAD SAID, ISRAEL WOULD NOT DARE TO INSIST UPON THE KIND OF PEACE SETTLEMENT IT ENVISAGES WITHOUT THE KIND OF ASSURANCES IT HAS OF U.S. SUPPORT. HE ASKED RHETORICALLY WHY THE U.S., KNOWING THAT THE MILITARY SITUATION CONTINUES TO FAVOR ISRAEL, INSISTS ON PERPETUATING THE MILITARY IMBALANCE BY THE FLOW OF ARMS TO ISRAEL.

10. GIVEN BOTH ASAD'S AND KHADDAM'S INSISTENCE ON THE PRIMACY OF THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE, I TRIED TO GET FROM ASAD A MORE PRECISE DEFINITION OF WHAT HE MEANS BY "THE RIGHTS OF THE PALESTINIANS." HE NEVER ANSWERED THIS QUESTION DIRECTLY, BUT DID MAKE A NUMBER OF COMMENTS WHICH MAY BE OF IMPORTANCE AS THE NEGOTIATING EFFORTS PROCEED. WHILE AVOIDING STATING A DEFINITIVE SYRIAN POSITION, HE INDICATED A WILLINGNESS TO CONSIDER VARIOUS ALTERNATIVES FOR PLO PARTICIPATION AT GENEVA INCLUDING REPRESENTATION ON A COMBINED ARAB DELEGATION OR INCLUSION IN THE JORDANIAN DELEGATION. HE ALSO LEFT OPEN THE DOOR FOR SADAT'S IDEA OF SOME KIND OF LINK BETWEEN A PALESTINIAN WEST BANK AND JORDAN AND MADE THE SOMEWHAT ELLIPTICAL COMMENT IN THIS CONNECTION THAT "WE DO NOT BELIEVE IN INCREASING THE NUMBER OF SMALL ENTITIES IN THE ARAB WORLD" IN GENERAL HE TOOK THE POSITION THAT IT WAS PREMATURE TO REACH CONCLUSIONS ON THE VARIOUS QUESTIONS RELATED TO PLO PARTICIPATION AND THE FORM OF A PALESTINIAN SETTLEMENT. ASAD ADMITTED THAT RELATIONS WERE NOT GOOD BETWEEN SYRIA AND THE PLO AND SHOWED LITTLE CONFIDENCE IN THE ABILITY OF THE PLO TO OVERCOME ITS OWN INTERNAL DIVISIONS.

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11. I DESCRIBED BRIEFLY TO ASAD OUR VIEW OF THE SOVIET ROLE IN A MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT, WHICH LED HIM TO COMMENT CRITICALLY ABOUT THE STATE OF SOVIET-SYRIAN RELATIONS. HE DESCRIBED THESE AS BEING "IN A PERIOD OF FRIGIDITY." HE SAID THE SOVIETS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS DETERIORATION, WHICH STEMMED FROM THEIR DISAGREEMENT WITH HIS ROLE IN LEBANON. HE WAS PREPARED FOR AN IMPROVEMENT BUT NOT AT THE EXPENSE OF GIVING UP THE PURSUIT OF SYRIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS.

12. IN DISCUSSING THE SITUATION IN LEBANON, FIRST

KHADDAM AND THEN ASAD REFLECTED SOME IRRITATION OVER OUR ROLE IN THE SOUTH LEBANON SITUATION. WHILE DEFERRING TO PRESIDENT SARKIS' JUDGMENT IN DECIDING TO PULL BACK THE SYRIAN ARAB SECURITY FORCES, THEY SAID THEY CONSIDERED IT INCOMPREHENSIBLE THAT WE WOULD SUPPORT ISRAEL'S CLAIM TO HAVE A SAY ABOUT HOW SARKIS DEPLOYED THE FORCES AT HIS DISPOSAL ON LEBANESE TERRITORY. IN THEIR VIEW, ISRAEL WAS SEEKING TO TEST THE NEW ADMINISTRATION IN WASHINGTON AND THE U.S. SHOULD HAVE REACTED MORE FIRMLY. I TOLD HIM THAT OUR SOLE CONCERN HAD BEEN TO AVOID A DANGEROUS SITUATION IN THE SOUTH AND THAT WE HAD ALSO BEEN FIRM IN URGING ISRAELI RESTRAINT. WITH REGARD TO THE SYRIAN TROOPS IN LEBANON, BOTH KHADDAM AND ASAD SAID THIS WAS A FINANCIAL BURDEN ON SYRIA AND THAT THEY WOULD BE WITHDRAWN AS SOON AS PRESIDENT SARKIS HAD ADEQUATE LEBANESE FORCES AT HIS DISPOSAL. NEITHER THOUGHT THIS WOULD HAPPEN SOON, HOWEVER. I SAID THAT SARKIS HAD TOLD ME THAT HE BELIEVED IT WOULD TAKE 3 TO 6 MONTHS TO PUT TOGETHER AND EQUIP SUCH FORCES. PRESIDENT ASSAD REPLIED THAT HE THOUGHT IT COULD BE DONE IN 4 MONTHS. LATER IN THE EVENING THE GENERAL IN CHARGE OF THE SYRIAN FORCES IN LEBANON WAS MUCH MORE PESSIMISTIC ON HOW LONG THIS WOULD TAKE.

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13. I FOUND ASAD PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE TO THE SUSPICION THAT WE MIGHT FOLLOW A POLICY OF SEEKING TO DIVIDE THE ARABS WHICH, HE HAD CONCLUDED, WAS THE POLICY OF THE PREVIOUS ADMINISTRATION DESPITE ITS CLAIMS TO THE CONTRARY. I ASSURED HIM THAT WE UNDERSTOOD THAT MOVEMENT TOWARD PEACE WOULD BE EASIER IF THE ARABS WERE UNITED AND THAT WE HAD NO DESIRE TO DRIVE WEDGES, AS HE PUT IT, BETWEEN THEM.

14. FOLLOWING OUR MAIN TALK, I MET PRIVATELY WITH ASAD AND ONLY INTERPRETER PRESENT. MY PRINCIPAL PURPOSE IN ASKING FOR A PRIVATE MEETING WAS TO RAISE WITH HIM THE QUESTION OF PERMITTING EMIGRATION FOR MEMBERS OF THE SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY, WHICH IS OF IMPORTANCE TO US ON HUMAN RIGHTS GROUNDS AND OF GREAT CONCERN TO SOME MEMBERS OF CONGRESS. I TOLD HIM WE WELCOME RECENT STEPS TO RELAX INTERNAL RESTRICTIONS ON SYRIAN JEWS BUT HOPED THAT THE EMIGRATION PROBLEM COULD ALSO BE DEALT WITH, IN PARTICULAR THE EMIGRATION OF YOUNG UNMARRIED GIRLS OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY FOR WHOM THERE ARE NO HUSBANDS IN SYRIA AND FOR WHOM JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS IN THE U.S. ARE PREPARED TO ARRANGE MARRIAGES IN THIS COUNTRY. ASAD SAID HE WOULD MOVE ON THIS QUESTION PROVIDED THERE WAS NO PUBLICITY, WHICH HE INDICATED WOULD CAUSE HIM POLITICAL PROBLEMS. HE SAID IN FACT HE HAD ALREADY PROMULGATED A DECREE WHICH WOULD NOT BE

PUBLICIZED WHICH WOULD PERMIT THIS TO BE DONE.

15. WE ALSO DISCUSSED IN PRIVATE IN MORE DETAIL THE QUESTION OF FINAL BOUNDARIES. ASAD INSISTED UPON A RETURN TO THE INTERNATIONAL BORDERS BUT SAID HE WAS WILLING TO HAVE DEMILITARIZED ZONES OF EQUAL SIZE ON BOTH SIDES. WE ALSO EXPLORED FURTHER THE QUESTION OF THE PLO AND THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION. I INDICATED THAT THERE APPEARED TO ME TO BE QUESTIONS WHICH HAD
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TO BE RESOLVED AMONG THE ARAB NATIONS. HE SAID THAT WAS CORRECT AND THAT THEY HAD MUCH WORK TO DO ON THESE ISSUES. FINALLY, HE EXPRESSED WARM APPRECIATION FOR YOUR LETTER OF INVITATION. HE SAID HE WOULD COME TO THE U.S. BUT FOR THE PRESENT WOULD PREFER TO MEET WITH YOU IN EUROPE IN MAY. HE WAS WARM AND FRIENDLY AND DEMONSTRATED AN ACUTE AND DISCIPLINED MIND.
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